

City commission debates closing streets for parties

■ **The VFW Auxiliary and Hispanics of Lenawee Alliance object to a ban on closures for privately sponsored events.**

By Andy Rogers
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ADRIAN — A proposed ban on closing most public streets in the city of Adrian for private gatherings was tabled by the Adrian City Commission Monday after the board heard pleas from two groups who depend on using space in city streets for annual programs.

Charlie Ojeda, speaking to commissioners on behalf of a group called HOLA (Hispanics of Lenawee Alliance), defended his group's wishes to close a one-block section of State Street for its annual fiesta that welcomes migrant farm workers back into the community.

The fiesta, sponsored by more than 40 Hispanic businesses in Adrian, is organized to recognize and to celebrate the positive impact migrant workers have on the local economy and culture, he said. Two decades ago, the gathering was an annual event in Adrian, but wasn't held for about 15 years until it was revived last year. Hundreds of people participated, causing minor traffic problems in the area. Police also were called to the street

party after an altercation involving one of the event's organizers and a neighborhood resident who was unhappy his driveway was cordoned off. No charges were filed in the incident.

The issue resurfaced at the city commission's May 15 meeting. Two residents from the neighborhood asked the commission to deny the group's permit this year based on last year's experiences. The festival meant too much traffic and noise in the neighborhood that includes the corner of State and Beecher streets, they said. In response to the comments, city administrator Dane Nelson met with public safety officials and proposed a policy that city streets not be closed for private parties unless the party is in the central business district.

"We've had continued problems with private parties because they have blocked off streets and we don't have fire access," Nelson said Monday. His proposal was to direct large private parties to the parks system, not the streets.

But HOLA leaders are concerned about the impact moving the fiesta will have. Ojeda told commissioners Monday that the neighborhood that has been used for the party is near his store, Dos Hermanos market, where migrant workers go to shop. He argued that it's the most appropriate location.

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"The reason that we have it at Dos Hermanos is this is where the migrants come," Ojeda said. "This is where they're comfortable."

Ojeda said the group has already planned to make accommodations for neighbors who want access to their driveways during the four-hour festival, planned for July 16. He argued that actually closing the street would be better from a public safety standpoint than having fiesta-goers try to make a go of the Dos Hermanos location without permission to reroute traffic.

"It would be in the benefit of the city to let us close the street ... for safety reasons, if no other," he said.

Commissioner Barb Mitzel, however, countered that it is difficult to authorize closing a street, not only because of the difficulty of moving emergency vehicles through the area, but also because the city maintains such a large parks system that can accommodate the parties.

Another commissioner, Harry "Dusty" Steele, asked whether the city was opening itself up to a legal battle by allowing street closings downtown, and nowhere else. Steele, who

helps organize the annual Maple City Fest, said he struggles himself to plan the festival in a way that makes enough room for safety vehicles to operate, but still provides appropriate street room for attractions.

Still, at least one Beecher Street resident, Tom Stoner, said the festival causes too many problems in the neighborhood to continue there.

"It's too many cars, too many people in one small area," he told the board.

Commissioners directed Nelson to meet again with city staff to formulate another policy to bring back to the board for consideration.

If it does not change, Brenda Schug, a representative from the VFW Ladies Auxiliary, said the policy would put one of her group's annual programs in jeopardy, too. Schug and others from the VFW plan to welcome troops back from Iraq and honor all veterans during a 12-hour program on July 29. The street in front of the VFW Hall must be closed to accommodate the crowd and various vendors that staff the event. A staple to the annual program is a chicken dinner for as many as 300 veterans — some of whom rely on the air-conditioned VFW hall to beat the July heat. If the street can't be closed, and the event is moved to a park, there would be no air conditioning, Schug said.

"It wouldn't work," she told the commission.

Adrian Police Chief Terry Collins said the city gets about six requests to close city streets for private parties each year. The migrant fiesta and VFW Auxiliary events are the only two regular petitioners, he said.

Both Ojeda and Schug said they have asked neighborhood residents for their blessings before holding past programs, and have always received their support.

Ben Negron, chairman of HOLA, could not attend Monday's city meeting, but said in a telephone interview that if the street-closing policy is adopted, the migrant fiesta might still be able to continue, but would lose something in the process.

"We do have a Plan B," Negron said. "Obviously, the ideal location would be where we would like to see it, both in terms of the customers and that we would like to establish a central location where we could do this yearly and not have to move it around. We want to take all consideration for the neighborhood and the residents, obviously."

"We don't want to be pushy or push our way into the neighborhood. We're hoping we can work this out. That's our goal. We want to be sure we can make this a fiesta, and by that I mean a celebration and not something that is marred by negativity."

"We will try to set the bond

ing fund projects in August with